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ABSTRACT

This research investigated college students' attitudes toward allegations of sexual harassment involving college instructors and students. A procedure was developed that could be administered in a single class session, aimed at increasing students' understanding of the conditions under which causal inferences are appropriate, sensitizing them to the phenomenon of sexual harassment, and examining students' perceptions of what constitutes harassment. Eight versions of a vignette involving a sexual liaison between an instructor and a student were developed, in which three factors were varied: (1) the party initiating the liaison; (2) the age of the student; and (3) the grade assigned for the course (either B or A). College students (N=255) participated in the research, during which students read the eight vignettes and recorded causal hypotheses relating to judgments of sexual harassment in each case. Results showed that the students' judgments of the instructor's guilt in the vignette were most influenced by his decision about the final grade. References are included. (TE)

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Causal Inference and Sexual Harassment: Hands-on Experience to Illustrate a Hands-off Policy

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Causal Inference and Sexual Harassment: Hands-on Experience to Illustrate a Hands-off Policy

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The present research had several major purposes. First, we wanted to provide a classroom demonstration of the classical experiment in which causal inferences may be appropriate (Zeller, 1988). Second, we were interested in increasing students' awareness of the inappropriateness of romantic involvement between evaluators (professors, graduate student instructors) and students. Third, we wanted to examine students' perceptions of behaviors that constitute sexual harassment.

Regarding the first goal, supposedly well-educated persons with high status and considerable power over public policy decisions are sometimes unable to differentiate instances in which causal vs. correlational inferences are warranted. An already classic, though very recent, example of this can be seen in the conclusions drawn by the Meese Commission on Pornography. In the absence of any research that demonstrates a causal relationship between exposure to erotic materials and subsequent commission of sexual aggression, the widely publicized majority report of the Commission nonetheless concluded that exposure to aggressive pornography causes sexual aggression. As academics, one of our responsibilities is to attempt to increase students' sophistication in evaluating research results and to know when causal vs. correlational inferences are appropriate.

With respect to the second goal, sexual relationships are quite common between college students and academics in positions of evaluative power over them. Across anonymously given harassment surveys, the rates at different institutions have ranged from 13 to 33 percent, and of those harassed in most studies, the majority report more than one experience of sexual harassment. As with sexual assault, the vast majority of students do not report harassment. For example, in Allen and Okawa's (1987) although 81 percent of hassessed students at the University of Illinois knew

that sexual harassment was prohibited by campus policy, only 5 percent of those who had experienced harassment reported it to any university office or official. In a survey done by Fitzgerald and her colleagues (1988), 25 percent of the male faculty reported having had sexual encounters with students, but only one of these reported having sexually harrassed a student. Further, research underway at our own institution indicates that students who have sexual relations with a graduate student instructor or faculty member from whom they are simultaneously taking a class don't necessary perceive these "dual relationships" as harassment or potentially injurious to their educational or career development. Thus, a third goal of our research program was to determine the extent to which students perceived dismissal of an instructors and/or expulsion of students as appropriate under various conditions of sexual harassment.

To achieve these goals, we developed a procedure that can be administered in a single class session aimed at increasing students' understanding of the classical experiment and the conditions under which causal inferences are appropriate, sensitizing them to the phenomenon of sexual harassment, and examining students' perceptions of what constitutes harassment. In the research that we are presenting today, we developed eight versions of a vignette in which three factors were varied. Specifically, a sexual liaison was initiated by either the instructor or the student, the students' age was varied (the instructors' age was held constant), and the grade assigned for the course was either the B that was earned or an A.

Method

Subjects

College students in an introductory sociology course (n = 255) participated in the research.

Materials

Eight different vignettes were developed in a 2 X 2 X 2 design in which Mary, a student in Dr. Bob's chemistry class, sought extra help with the course content during office hours with Dr. Bob.

To manipulate student vs. instructor initiation, in the student-initiation version, Mary deliberately adjusts her position to expose considerable cleavage during their meeting, Dr. Bob notices this, but avoids looking at her chest, and Mary proposes that they meet at her apartment in the evening to complete their work. When they have finished reviewing course material, Mary caresses Dr. Bob's hand, puts her arms around him and begins to kiss him. In the instructor initiation version, Dr. Bob adjusts his position to get a better view of Mary's cleavage and when Mary realizes that he is looking at her chest, she adjusts her position to reduce exposure of her chest. Dr. Bob proposes that they meet at his apartment in the evening to continue their review and when they finish their work, Bob caresses Mary's hand, puts his arms around her, and begins kissing her. Regardless of who initiates, a sexual affair ensues.

To manipulate age, Mary is described as being either 19 or 27 years of age. Dr. Bob's age is held constant at 37.

To manipulate the course grade, Mary is described as having earned a B in the course, and she goes to Dr. Bob's office to request that the grade be changed to an A. They argue, and he subsequently either leaves the grade unchanged, or changes it to an A.

Students reading the vignette were then asked to indicate the extent of their approval for dismissal of the instructor and expulsion of the student in response to the vignette that they had read using two 9-point scales ranging from 1 (definitely no) to 9 (definitely yes).

Procedure

Each student received one of the eight vignettes. After completing their ratings, a student was asked to read the vignette to the class. As it was read, other students realized that they had received different versions of the vignette. In class discussion, the independent variables became clear to the students, and the 2 x 2 x 2 design was drawn on the chalkboard. Students were then asked to indicate the conditions under which they believe that judgments about the student and professor

would be most harsh, and their hypotheses were written on the chalkboard. Common hypotheses were that judgments would be harsher on the professor when the student is 19 (versus 27); on the initiator of the affair; and on both the professor and the student when a grade of A is assigned. Their hypotheses were written on the chalkboard, and then their ratings were tabulated in class. This tabulation is facilitated by the fact that the each vignette is identified by a lower case letter (a through h) at the bottom of the vignette.

Results and Discussion

Mean ratings, as seen in Tables 1 and 2, showed a main effect for grade (A versus B) for both dismissal of the professor and expulsion of the student. A comparison of mean ratings with hypotheses illustrated how observations are used to confirm or disconfirm hypotheses. Specifically, the hypothesis was confirmed that the student and professor will be judged more harshly when an A is assigned. However, the hypotheses that the judgment would be more harsh on the initiator of the affair and on the professor when the student is 19 were not confirmed. The process of creating research designs, generating hypotheses, obtaining data to test the hypotheses, and interpreting the results addressed Goal 1.

The second goal of sensitizing students to the phenomenon of harassment was handled by exploration of the implications of the study. Instructors may ask students what other variables they think might influence judgments of the student and instructor who become romantically/sexually involved while the student is taking a course from the instructor. Although we have described the results from one class demonstration in this paper, we have conducted it in three large classes, and students have spontaneously suggested additional hypotheses to be tested. For example, they have hypothesized that an affair that occurs without a "sex for grade" or "grade for sex" verbal contract will be judged less harshly than when such a contract is made explicit. When these discussions take place, the vulnerability of students and evaluators who engage in

sexual relations becomes apparent. Thus, the hands-on experience with causal inference instruction can be used to illustrate a hands-off policy.

With respect to the third goal, we were surprised that students' judgments were most influenced by whether the final grade was the earned B or the desired A. When the grade was not altered, approval of dismissal or expulsion fell below the mid-point of the 9 point scale. As pointed out spontaneously by our students, a romantic/sexual relationship between a student and evaluator severely threatens academic integrity, but if the grade was not altered, the students were not inclined to punish the instructor or despite the "dual relationship."

References

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Table 1

Dependent Variable 1: Judgments of professor (1 = nondismissal, 9 = dismissal)

	Student's age			
	19		27	
	Initiator		Initiator	
	Professor	Student	Professor	Student
Grade				
A	5.9	5.5	5.3	5.3
B	3.7	4.0	4.3	3.3

Main Effects Tested

Student's age: 19 = 4.8; 27 = 4.6 (n.s.)

Initiator: Professor = 4.8; Student = 4.5 (n.s.)

Final grade: A = 5.5; B = 3.8 (significant difference)

Table 2

Dependent Variable 2: Judgments of student (1 = nonexpulsion, 9 = expulsion)

	Student's age			
	19		27	
	Initiator		Initiator	
	Professor	Student	Professor	Student
Grade				
A	4.6	3.9	4.6	4.4
B	2.5	3.5	3.3	3.5

Main Effects Tested

Student's age: 19 = 3.6; 27 = 4.0 (n. s.)

Initiator: Professor = 3.8; Student = 3.8 (n. s.)

Final grade: A = 4.4; B = 3.2 (significant difference)

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*Note: We do not perform inferential statistics with this exercise as it is beyond the level of introductory college courses. We inform students that differences equal to or less than one full scale point are usually due to chance factors and are thus not reliable, whereas differences greater than one full scale point (e.g., the ratings of 5.5 versus 3.8 indicating greater approval for dismissal of the instructor who gives an A versus a B) are probably statistically significant.